

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Emily Dickinson and the Lyrics of Soundgarden

ENGL237: POETRY

DEBBIE MIX

JUSTIN WATTERSON

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Creativity seemed to arrive when emotions were, for the first time, condensed and molded into various forms of art. At first this form of art might have been some type of nonverbal gesture. It might have developed into a grunt afterward, then into a cave drawing even later. Regardless, the modern world still defines art as an atypical method of conveying a particular emotion. Poetry is the foremost literal form of art, and Emily Dickinson is one of the most revered American poets ever. Her style was unique, bold, and strong with emotion, and her poetry was, for the most part, very personal. These are qualities that make a poet's work valid. In the modern world, Chris Cornell might seem a poet in few people's eyes. However, he has shown many of the same qualities as Emily Dickinson in the lyrics he has composed for Soundgarden. In fact, the lifestyles of the two are quite comparable. In this discussion, the lifestyles of Emily Dickinson and Chris Cornell will be compared and contrasted, and the differences and similarities between their separate literary views of certain issues and emotions will be examined as well.

Emily Dickinson is immediately associated with reclusivity when mentioned. She was born into a fairly wealthy atmosphere and attended a female school for a year. However, she chose to abandon her schooling and return to her home in Amherst, Massachusetts in the end. Here she stayed for the rest of her adult life. The popular belief is that Ms. Dickinson lived a dull, boring, reclusive life for the rest of her days. This might be true to an extent, but it is also apparent that she had the occasional exciting incident. This could be suggested by poems such as "Wild Nights" (#249). Perhaps her whole intent was to let the wandering eyes that encountered her poems believe that she did, indeed, live a perfectly uneventful life. Her innovative style perplexed those who examined her works. In the years after her death, her poetry was discovered, published, and applauded. It had not been written for the gain of wealth; it had been composed in her own personal forum with the purpose of venting her emotions clearly in the method she knew best. Her sincerity is what has made her poetry so popular.

Chris Cornell is very much alive, quite rich, and tremendously famous in his field. He makes music and writes lyrics for a living. However, his lifestyle away from his other ego as a rock god is quite comparable to the lifestyle of Emily Dickinson. Chris quit attending Catholic

school when he was fifteen, right about the time of his parents' divorce. Similar to Dickinson, he became quite self-confined and uninvolved with society from that point on. He took a job at a popular seafood restaurant in Seattle, where he went for weeks sometimes without speaking to his coworkers. At home, alone, he would cradle his guitar and his pen. He stumbled into a bassist named Yamamoto and was also introduced to another guitarist, Kim Thayil. Eventually they created Soundgarden, a band which inspired a new, dark, rain-soaked Seattle sound. However, the Chris Cornell the world sees onstage is not the artist at all. He rarely leaves home. He is married to the band's producer, yet they see each other and speak to one another very seldom. His songs are very personal just as Emily Dickinson's poems were, and in the modern obscurity of art, they are quite poetic. Chris Cornell is in no way a typical "rock star."

The most convincing way to draw comparisons between these two figures who seem completely unlike is to examine the works that they have composed. It is interesting to analyze what the two think of their own mentalities. In "Much Madness is divinest Sense" (l. 435'), Emily Dickinson describes her impression of the activity within her own mind. She uses a simple, cyclic paradox to illustrate her mentality. According to Dickinson, "Much Madness is divinest Sense" (l. 1), yet "Much Sense--the starkest Madness" (l. 3). This paradoxical view might have been Dickinson's justification for her own unique state of mind. Chris Cornell uses similar contradictory terms to tell us how he feels about his own mentality in "Mind Riot." Cornell says that he is "luck's last match struck / in the pouring down wind." This is his view of the workings of his own mind. Obviously, both are aware that their minds function outside of the normal accepted realm. In Dickinson's time, this could have been viewed as a terrible thing. Perhaps that is why she kept her poetry a secret and did not seek publication. In today's world, however, abnormal minds are quite welcome. Therefore, Chris Cornell's invention is very much accepted.

Examining the way that each views their reclusive lifestyle is quite interesting as well. Emily Dickinson's "The Soul selects her own Society" ("303") gives an excellent account of how she sees her own lifestyle. In the poem, Dickinson basically says that she was predestined to her lifestyle and that her soul would continue to adhere to that same lifestyle until death embraced her.

W. not sure if
this is how these
poems are compared
'Much Madness' is

good poem
/ Dickinson's
gender as compared
to the other poem

She says she "shuts the Door-- / To her divine Majority" (ll. 2, 3) and persists with the life she has already begun. This is a recurring theme in many of Chris Cornell's songs. "Blow Up the Outside World" gives the most accurate description of Cornell's thoughts on his own reclusive lifestyle.

The chorus of the song screams "Burrow down in and / Blow up the outside world." He also sings, "Nothing will do me in before I do myself." Surely, Dickinson felt quite the same at times. Both isolate themselves from the world around, and both seem to make an attempt to justify it in their words. Neither of the two seems to feel disturbed by their different lifestyle, however. In fact, they both almost seem proud of choosing a different route and being able to maintain sanity.

Another similarity between these two artists is their apparent obsession with death and darkness. Emily Dickinson has dwelled on the topic of death in many of her poems. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" ("280"), she describes her own funeral in detail. The poem has a very dark feel, and Dickinson ends it abruptly, offering an interpretation of the speed of death. She says that "Mourners to and fro / Kept treading--treading--till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through" (ll. 2-4). This description is dark and disturbing like many of Chris Cornell's own descriptions. In "Fourth of July," he describes a similar procession of souls in an apocalyptic setting: "The scared light cracks and disappears / And leads the scorched ones here." Just as "280" serves as Dickinson's anticipation and vision of her own death, "Fourth of July" does the same for Chris Cornell. Both seem to believe that they will have some sort of death that is completely out of the ordinary. In "536," Dickinson gives us a picture of a peaceful death. Perhaps this is the death she would like to have. She says that the heart asks for painkillers "that deaden suffering-- / and then-- go to sleep--" (ll. 4,5). She also describes death as "the privilege" (l. 8). The entire mood of this poem very much resembles "Tighter and Tighter." In this song, Cornell describes a similar peaceful passing. He describes how "a sudden snake / Found my shape and tells the world." The chorus echoes, "Sleep tight for me / I'm gone." The song tells of a man who passes in his sleep, just as the "Heart" passes in Emily Dickinson's "536." To these two figures, a bold, peaceful, willing death seems intriguing. Their views on death, like any other topic, have been relatively unaffected by the world around, since both choose to shut out society.

*I'm not sure
how often you
remembered the
poem writing it
the last time
you wrote it*

Considering the lifestyles that these two lived, it is conceivable that they experienced severe loneliness at times. This can be extracted from their words as well. Emily Dickinson's "254" talks about the meaning of hope: "the thing with feathers-- / that perches in the soul--" (ll. 1;2). In the last lines of the poem, she creates a feeling of despair and loneliness by saying that "never, in Extremity, / It asked a crumb--of Me" (ll. 11;12). This is a general statement in which Dickinson simply says that she lacks hope, but it can be assumed that her lack of hope was fueled by her loneliness. Chris Cornell describes his loneliness in "Zero Chance," where he says he was "born without a friend / and bound to die alone." He also asks, "Why doesn't anyone believe / in loneliness?" This describes on a personal level, and in much detail, how Cornell sometimes feels about his self-containment. On a more general scale, one can assess his lack of hope by taking a look at "The Day I Tried to Live." In this song, Cornell describes what seems to happen when he strives to achieve: "The day I tried to live / I wallowed in the blood and mud with / all the other pigs." Ironically, Cornell seems intimidated by life and intrigued by death. This is much the same for Dickinson. This point seems to be the basis for the lifestyles of both people also.

Obviously, the life of Chris Cornell, as popular and famous as he is, cannot be completely unexciting. Surely Dickinson's life was not totally bland either. Dickinson suggests an invigorating sexual encounter in "Wild Nights" ("249"). She speaks around the matter very skillfully, but her accepted interpretation seems apparent. "Might I but moor--Tonight-- / In Thee!" (ll. 11, 12) seems to be a plea to make love. With a definitely more modern style, "Big Dumb Sex" conveys much the same message. In this song, Cornell sings "Don't you want to thrill me? / Don't you be afraid to tell me." In the same manner (with a more modern phrasing), Cornell seems to be persuading a woman to go to bed with him. Most likely these exciting "highlights" of each artist's life were genuine (yet rare) and not fantasy. Cornell is more blunt when speaking of sex than Dickinson, however. This would be expected considering the differences in the environments that surrounded the two. However, "Big Dumb Sex" was written by a younger Chris Cornell, much the same as "Wild Nights" was written by a younger Emily Dickinson.

Both of these artists were exposed to religion. Dickinson used many references to the Bible. Cornell grew up in the Catholic environment. Therefore, religious aspects appear in the works of both. For Dickinson, the use of religion occurred in many poems. However, "986" discusses the nature of Satan. The poem depicts him as the traditional, biblical snake. She describes his approach (temptation), his bite (the success of temptation), and his evasive nature (fear of God). In the end, she says that she has "never met this Fellow / Attended, or alone" (ll. 21,22). Chris Cornell gives a depiction of Satan in "Applebite." In this song, he plays the role of Satan, and he is able to create the mood more accurately with the music and tricks of the voice. The song shows Satan at work, tempting some poor sinner. "No one can save / The pure or the brave," he states. Cornell is apparently firm in his beliefs, however. In "Jesus Christ Pose," he attacks the televangelist filth that profits from religious fraud. Of the televangelists he asks, "And would it pay you more to walk on water than to wear a crown of thorns?" While Cornell and Dickinson both understand the nature and certainty of sin, they also both seem to know the route to salvation.

The comparisons between Emily Dickinson and Chris Cornell are not completely far-fetched. There are many similarities between these two terribly different individuals. Chris Cornell has more tools at hand to synthesize his emotions than Emily Dickinson had. However, Dickinson certainly was able to define her emotions quite precisely, for her poetry is still admired, studied, and pondered today. Both of the two seemed to carry many of the same emotions and even chose to discuss the emotions in the same manner often. Emily Dickinson was born over a hundred years before Chris Cornell. Perhaps Cornell was influenced by many of her works. At any rate, the two had an obsession with the dark and mysterious and with death. Their way of viewing it and addressing it could even be compared. It is apparent that both felt the pain of loneliness in their life. Also, however boring and cold their separate lives may seem, they certainly had stints of excitement tossed in from time to time. Neither artist was lacking in intelligence or ingenuity. They both express their emotions so accurately. Neither can be accurately described as insane or crazy. When their works are examined, it is hard to argue that either lacked sanity. They were

interesting - great
a switch from your
previous interpretation

where he is
see others

individuals, and certain differences set them apart from the surrounding world. The creativity of both Emily Dickinson and Chris Cornell cannot be disputed, however. The works of both of these artists are very sincere and very meaningful.

This is a surprising pair of poets, but you show a lot of really interesting similarities between them. You pick up on a lot of intriguing points, + you organize your discussions of them very well. However, you move much too quickly through each of these points. Although I don't doubt that there's plenty of evidence which supports your interpretation, you don't give yourself a chance to show it to your reader. Instead, you use just a line or two from an entire poem/song to demonstrate your point. While it can be useful to show lots of examples, you shouldn't let breadth substitute for depth. Slow down, explain each point clearly, + cite plenty of detailed examples before moving on.

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WORKS CITED

Ferguson, Margaret, & Mary Jo Salter & Jon Stallworthy. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

"Mind Riot" (*Badmotorfinger*)

I was slipping through the cracks
Of a stolen jewel
I was tightrope walking in two ton shoes
Now somebody is talking about a
Thirld world war
And the police said this was normal control
And the candle was burning yesterday
Like somebody's best friend died
And I've been caught in a mind riot
I was crying from my eye teeth and
Bleeding from my soul
And I sharpened my wits on a dead man's skull
I built an elevator from his bones
Had to climb to the top floor just
To stamp out the coals
And the candle was burning yesterday
Like somebody's best friend died
And I've been caught in a mind riot
I'm tied within
I'm luck's last match struck
In the pouring down wind

"Blow Up the Outside World" (*Down on the Upside*)

Nothing seems to kill me no matter how hard I try
Nothing is closing my eyes
Nothing can beat me down for your pain or delight
And nothing seems to break me
No matter how far I fall
Nothing can break me at all
Not one for giving up though not invincible
I know
I've given everything I need
I'd give you everything I own
I'd give in if it could at least be ours alone
I've given everything I could
To blow it to hell and gone
Burrow down in and
Blow up the outside world
Someone tried to tell me something
Don't let the world bring you down
Nothing can do me in before I do myself
So save it for your own and the ones you can help
Want to make it understood
Wanting though I never would
Trying though I know it's wrong

Blowing it to hell and gone
Wishing though I never could
Blow up the outside world

"4th of July" (*Superunknown*)

Shower in the dark day
Clean sparks diving down
Cool in the waterway
Where the baptized drown
Naked in the cold sun
Breathing life like fire
I thought I was the only one
But that was just a lie
Because I heard it in the wind
And I saw it in the sky
And I thought it was the end
Thought it was the fourth of July
Pale in the flare light
The scared light cracks and disappears
And leads the scorched ones here
And everywhere, no one cares
The fire is spreading
No one wants to speak about it
Down in a hole
Jesus tries to crack a smile
Beneath another shovel load
Now I'm in control
Now I'm in the fall out
Once asleep but now I stand
And I still remember
Your sweet everything
Light a Roman candle
And hold it in your hand

"Tighter & Tighter" (*Down on the Upside*)

Shadow face
Blowing smoke and talking wind
Lost my grip
Fell too far to start again
A sudden snake
Found my shape and tells the world
Remember this
Remember everything is just black
Or burning sun
And I hope it's a sweet ride

Sleep tight for me
Sleep tight for me, I'm gone
Warm and sweet
Swinging from a window's ledge
Tight and deep
One last sin before I'm dead
A sucking holy wind
Will take me from this bed tonight
And bloody wits
Another hits me and I have to say goodbye
And I hope it's a sweet ride
Here for me tonight
Because I feel I'm going
Feel I'm slowing down

"Zero Chance" (*Down on the Upside*)

I think I know the answer
I stumbled on and all the world fell down
And all the sky went silent
Cracked like glass and slowly
Tumbled to the ground
They say if you look hard
You'll find your way back home
Born without a friend
And bound to die alone
I'm thinking of your highness
And crying long upon the loss I've found
And on the plus and minus
Zero chance of ever turning this around
Why doesn't anyone believe
In loneliness?
Stand up and everyone will see
Your holiness.
They say if you look hard
You'll find your way back home
Born without a friend
And bound to die alone

"The Day I Tried to Live" (*Superunknown*)

I woke the same as any other day except a voice was in my head
It said seize the day, pull the trigger, drop the blade
And watch the rolling heads
The day I tried to live
I stole a thousand beggars chagne and gave it to the rich
The day I tried to win

I dangled from the power lines and let the martyrs stretch
Singing one more time around might do it
One more time around might make it
The day I tried to live
Words you say never seem to live up to the ones inside your head
The lives we make never seem to ever get us anywhere but dead
The day I tried to live
I wallowed in the blood and mud witha ll the other pigs
The day I tried to win
I dangled from the power lines and let the martyrs stretch
Singing one more time around might do it
One more time around might make it
The day I tried to live
I woke the same
As any other day y'know I
Should have stayed in bed
The day I tried to live
I wallowed in the blood and mud with all the other pigs
And I learned that I was a liar
Just like you

"Big Dumb Sex" (*Louder than Love*)

Don't you want to thrill me
Don't you be afraid to tell me
Tell me if you think it's ugly
But now dont' you want to touch it anyway
I've been looking for a reject
And you ain't had nothing like me yet
Don't you think it's time for motion
I can take what you've been pushin'
Hey I know what to do
I'm gonna fuck you
I'm the beast and you're the master
You're the meat of the matter
I'm no fool for discretion
When it's on my tongue

"Applebite" (*Down on the Upside*)

Nothing can save
The pure or the brave
Nothing can save them at all
Grow and decay
Grow and decay
It's only forever
Loosely or tightly

Everything fits
Even the wrist on your arm
Grow and decay
Grow and decay
It's only forever

"Jesus Christ Pose" (*Badmotorfinger*)

And you stare at me in your Jesus Christ pose
Arms held out like you've been carrying a load
And you swear to me you don't want to be my slave
But you're staring at me like I need to be saved
In your Jesus Christ pose
Arms held out
In your Jesus Christ pose
Throns and shroud like it's the coming of the Lord
And I swear to you that I would never feed you pain
But you're staring at me like I'm driving the nails
In your Jesus Christ pose
And you stare at me
In your Jesus Christ pose
Arms held out like it's the coming of the Lord
And would it pay you more to walk on water
Than to wear a crown of thorns
It wouldn't pain me more to bury you rich
Than to bury you poor
In your Jesus Christ pose